

Chautauqua Watershed Notes
From the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy
February 8, 2009

Chautauqua County Envirothon Nurtures Our Future Land Stewards
By Priscilla Titus
For the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy



Doug Ewing, SUNY Fredonia's Dean of Sciences, welcomes a filled auditorium of participants to the kickoff of this year's Chautauqua County Envirothon.

In that last few decades, it seems to me that middle and high school students learn very little about our natural history. Would you believe that very few incoming freshman biology majors in western New York can identify a sugar maple, a brook trout, or a red-winged blackbird? Unfortunately, it's true. So it was with great pleasure that I watched the kickoff of the 20th annual Chautauqua County Envirothon held at SUNY Fredonia's Jewett Hall on January 23rd with numerous area high schools participating this year. The Chautauqua County Soil and Water Conservation District coordinates this program in our area with the help of numerous volunteers and sponsors. The kickoff included a lineup of local experts to present information on a variety of topics ranging from geology and soils to wildlife, forestry, and aquatic ecosystem issues. The Envirothon is one of the State's biggest environmental programs for high school students and comprises an academic competition that focuses on environmental knowledge. It began in 1979 in Pennsylvania by Soil and Water Conservation Districts and since that time has grown into a major program that extends throughout the United States and Canada.

The idea behind the Envirothon is that constructive competition cultivates a student's desire to learn more about the environment and thus to develop a greater appreciation for the use and conservation of our natural resources. The Envirothon is an after-school extracurricular activity for grades 9 through 12. Students are grouped into small teams that study five broad topics: soils, forestry, wildlife, aquatics and a current issue. This year's national current issue concentrates on biodiversity in a changing world.

Each team has an advisor, who is usually a science teacher, but could also be a parent or community leader. The advisor guides the students in their preparation for the competitions and accompanies them on their travels. In April, each of the teams will be rigorously tested in each of the topics, and the team that scores the highest will go on to the New York State Envirothon to compete against teams from every county in the state. This year's state level competition will be held May 27-28 at Keuka College near Seneca Lake. The winning team at the state level will represent New York at the International Canon Envirothon, where high-scoring teams receive college scholarships and other awards.

The rewards of this program are many. The Envirothon promotes a desire to learn and gives students the skills needed to understand fundamental concepts that guide resource management. Successful participation will require that students refine their team-working, critical-thinking, cooperative problem-solving, and decision-making skills. Schools and teachers benefit by providing a learning opportunity to motivated students who excel or have great interest in the sciences and ecology. The community and state benefit by the nurturing concerned and well-informed citizens and future leaders who can make sound decisions about the environment and value stewardship of natural resources.

Students involved in the Envirothon often pursue further education in environmental fields. Many Envirothon participants pursuing college degrees in various natural resource studies have indicated that their education choice was partly due, or strengthened by, their Envirothon experience. Sponsors to help with logistics and to fund the cost of travel and materials are needed. If you are interested in learning more about the Chautauqua County Envirothon or helping with the effort, you can contact David Wilson at Chautauqua County Soil & Water Conservation District, 3542 Turner Road, Jamestown, NY (716-664-2351 Ext.3).

The Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy is a private, not-for-profit, 501(c)(3) organization with a mission to preserve and enhance the water quality, scenic beauty and ecological health of the lakes, streams and watersheds of the Chautauqua region. Its urgent focus is to conserve the endangered natural shore lands of Chautauqua Lake, which provide fish and wildlife habitat and pollution filtering functions essential to a healthy lake. Only four miles (10%) of the lake's shoreline remains in a natural, undeveloped condition. The Conservancy is funded primarily through membership donations. Its 2009 annual membership campaign is currently underway. It is presently raising funds to conserve the Chautauqua Lake's most important remaining natural shoreline habitats, undertake programs to address the root causes of the conditions that fuel lake plant growth, and manage its preserves. It is the only local organization conserving lands in perpetuity for these purposes. Please contact the Conservancy at 664-2166 to join for 2009!